

**'Civilized Barbarity'<sup>1</sup>: Exploring *Lord of the Flies* in Postcolonial Discourse**

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**Abstract**

*Golding's debut novel Lord of the Flies was published in 1954 after being rejected by 21 publishers. However, right from its publication, the novel has been attracting critical views of various scholars. The novel, on its surface value, deals with the story of the marooned English boys on an uninhabited island, as a result of an air crash. During the course of the novel, the boys forsake the qualities of 'being civilized' and adopt the traits of savagery, fortunately to be saved by a naval officer at the end. In the present paper an attempt is made to explore Golding's preoccupations with the binary contrasts between such terms as civilization/savagery, dark/light, white/black. In his attempt to describe the violent and cruel activities of the boys on the island, however, Golding consistently employs words like 'savage' (58 times), 'tribe' (42), 'hunt' (33), 'hunter' (53), etc, revealing his imperialist attitude. It points to the ideology of the western people to 'savage' the so-called exotic, non-western world.*

**Key words:** *Lord of the Flies*, savage, civilized, English, imperialism, etc.

**I**

By common consent, *Lord of the Flies* is Golding's most famous novel which has been inviting critical inquiry right from its publication in 1954. Though the novel was turned down by 21 publishers before its final publication<sup>2</sup>, it has proved the test of time and consistently finds a place in school and university curriculum. The novel depicts the story of some English boys marooned on an uninhabited island as a result of a plane-crash. In the beginning, the boys are happy and enjoy the flora and fauna of the island with romantic mood, as there is none to restrict them. But gradually the boys are divided into two groups - one led by Ralph, who represents the civilized, modern English world, and the chief of the other group is Jack, one of the choirboys, who wants to lead a kind of tribal life on the island.

Jack does not approve Ralph as the leader of the group, as he wishes to be one. In order to soften the resistance of Jack, Ralph appoints him as the chief of the choirboys. Jack's group is assigned the job of hunting for meat, protecting the boys and looking after the signal fire. However, due to the 'discovery' of a beast on the mountain, the groups are disturbed and Jack overthrows the authority of Ralph. In his attempt to lead a natural, tribal life on the island, Jack falls prey to violence and cruelty to the extent that his group kills Simon and Piggy and attempt to manhunt and kill Ralph. However, fortunately for Ralph, he is saved accidentally, by a naval officer who comes to the island finding the smoke fire set by Jack's group to manhunt Ralph.

Many critics have examined the novel from various perspectives. one group of critics<sup>3</sup> prefer to read the novel as an adventure story; which is similar to the one presented in *The Coral Island* by Ballantyne. Some others<sup>4</sup> have compared *The Coral Island* and *Lord of the Flies* and point out Golding's indebtedness to Ballantyne for borrowing both the names of the characters and setting of the novel. However, they read *Lord of the Flies* as a parody of the earlier novel, for, unlike the boys in *The Coral Island*, the boys in *Lord of the Flies* are unable to overcome evil and are themselves involved in the evil act to the extent that they kill some of them. Taking clues from Golding's words, some critics<sup>5</sup> have identified the fable structure of the novel and the implicit allegory in it. These critics read both the characters and the events in the novel with double meaning and claim that the novel portrays the journey of the English children from civilization to savagery on the uninhabited island on which they were marooned. This reading of the novel also supports the view that evil is present in all of us. Some other critics<sup>6</sup> have also studied the novel using Freudian perspective. For them, the three major characters - Ralph, Piggy and Jack - represent the three levels of mind - Superego, Ego and Id respectively. Stefan Hawlin<sup>7</sup> has examined the novel in the light of colonial discourse. He argues that *Lord of the Flies* can be compared to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in that both these novels, without any actual knowledge of the so called barbaric and exotic land, propose that civilization is represented by the British/ European and the part occupied by the colonized is savage/ barbaric. Thus both these texts seek to strengthen the binary contrast between the colonized (savage/barbaric) and the colonizer (civilized/ modern). He thus shows that Golding is also an imperialist as was Conrad.

However, Brian Shaffer<sup>8</sup> provides another reason for the 'loss of innocence' of children in *Lord of the Flies*. He brings together the novels like Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *The Inheritors* (1955), Robin Jenkin's *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*, Ian

McEwan's *Black Dogs* (1992) and Mark Bher's *The Smell of Apples* (1995). He argues that the reason for the 'civilized barbarity' present in these novels is the changed scenario of the world after World War II. In the present article, however, an attempt is made to reveal the imperialist attitude of Golding and the way he seeks to divide the world in blacks and whites. The transformation of Golding's boys in *Lord of the Flies* from 'English' to the 'savage' and the portrayal of the identity of both the English and the savage represents his biased attitude towards those who live in the company of the nature. In fact, the 'binarism' prevalent in the colonial discourse has been extensively used and strengthened by Golding, showing his inherent imperialist attitude. The binaries like English/savage, white/black, light/darkness, civilization/nature, human/beast are constantly employed in the text.

## II

It is a common knowledge that the colonizing countries attempted to rationalize their rule in the colonies with the help of various ideologies. 'Binarism' is one of such ideologies. It refers to the binary division made during the colonial discourse between such terms as colonizer/colonized, teacher/pupil, doctor/patient, white/black, civilized/savage, etc. One of the aspects of these binaries is that they are mutually exclusives and also that there is no possibility of the middle or third term. The terms involved in such binaries are not simply descriptive. Rather, with the help of them, a special kind of hierarchy is maintained, in which the first term of each binarism is important, whereas the other is always marginal, subsidiary and unimportant. In this context, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin<sup>9</sup> write:

The binary logic of imperialism is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance. A simple distinction between centre/margin, colonizer/colonized, metropolis/empire, civilized/primitive represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates. (24)

As it is suggested in the above quote, the Western thought in general tends to divide the world in two opposite, binary categories. One of these categories relates to them, whereas the other stands for those whom they ruled. However, in the process of this division, they used pejorative terms for the others, leading to the 'othering' process. This is clearly put by Bill Ashcroft and others as follows:

Clearly, the binary is very important in constructing ideological meanings in general, and extremely useful in imperial ideology. The binary structure, with its various articulations of the underlying binary, accommodates such fundamental binary impulses within imperialism as the impulse to 'exploit' and the impulse to 'civilize'. Thus we may also find that colonizer, civilized, teacher and doctor may be opposed to

colonized, primitive, pupil and patient, *as a comparatively effortless extension of the binary structure of domination*. In fact, of course, as we are increasingly aware, the one depends on the other in a much more complex way than this simplistic binary structure suggests, with the 'civilizing mission' of the former categories acting as the cloak for the naked exploitation of these consigned to their binary opposites, and the former category all too often acting to conceal and justify the latter, as Conrad showed so graphically in *Heart of Darkness*. (emphasis mine)

As the writers point out, while preparing the binary categories, the imperialist did not take pains to explore the facts. Rather, the simple, effortless extension of the terms used to refer to themselves is applied to the other, the colonized. Of course, the creating of such binaries helped the colonizer to conceal its imperialist exploitative nature under the name of the civilizing mission.

### III

Like an imperialist, Golding has also made an extensive use of such binaries in *Lord of the Flies*<sup>10</sup>. The contrast between the English and the savage is intensified. For example, the word 'savage' appears 58 times in the novel. So also the other words like black/ blackness (52 times), tribe (42 times), dark/darkness (116 times), white (57 times), light (59 times), hunter (62 times), hunting (34 times), hunt (33 times), kill (37 times), etc. The use of all these and such words perpetuate the imperialist binary distinction. Of course, the reason of using these words is the demand of the story. But the question remains - why only these words, not the others? In order to explore the use of these words in the novel, let us find out the exact contexts where they are used and what they indicate. As has been mentioned earlier, the word 'savage/s' is used for 58 times. Let us explore some of its contexts in the novel:

The word 'savage' is used for the first time in Chapter 2 by the narrator and it runs like the following:

On the one side the air was cool, but on the other the first thrust cut a savage arm of heat that crinkled hair on the instant.

Quickly after the use of this word by the narrator to refer to an aspect of island's climate, Piggy uses it to make a difference between English and non-English (savage):

I agree with Ralph. We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we are not savage. We're English, and the English are best at everything. So we have got to do the right things.

This assertion of Piggy, the intellectual<sup>11</sup> among the children, makes a binary contrast between the English and the non-English. Note the words associated with English - they have

and obey rules, they are best at everything and they (do) right things. This is nothing but the narrow parochialism. The negation of all these qualities is what is means to be a savage.

In the beginning of the novel, the word is used to describe the uninhabited island. Then it was invoked by the boys to separate themselves from the savage; a kind of self-interrogation as in Piggy's quote, above. The following are some other occurrences of the same:

What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or Savages? What's grownups going to think? Going off --- hunting pigs --- letting fire out -- and now? (Chapter 5)

Here again Piggy makes the same distinction, but this time between humans and savages. The savages are not only non-English but they are also non-humans. A kind of negation of their human qualities. Similar views are also expressed again in Chapter 11 when Piggy tries to convince the others of the importance of the signal fire for their rescue. Piggy says:

Just an ordinary fire. You'd think we could do that, wouldn't you? Just a smoke signal so we can be rescued. Are we savages or what?

As it is clear from all the above quotes, Piggy is particularly bent on separating the English children from savages. It is interesting to note it here that Piggy represents the rationalist and intellectualist perspective associated with the English people. It means, among others, that the rationality of the English is based on certain assumptions the validity of which is never rationally examined.

It is interesting to note it here that out of the total 58 times the word 'savage/s' is used, once it refers to forest and twice it refers to human organ ('savage arm', 'savage voice'). All the remaining 55 times the word is used to refer to those boys who have joined Jack's group and feed themselves on the meat of the hunts. In fact, Golding could have used any other word to refer to the violent and cruel activities of the boys and their way of life on the island. But his use of this specific word reveals his imperialist attitude. In order to convince the readers of the so called savagery of the boys, Golding has also made use of some other words associated with the word 'savage'. They are, but not limited to, tribe, hunt, hunter, hunting, spear, forest, throat, black and white, etc. Let us now look at the use of some of these words in the novel. The most cruel and violent action of the boys has been described with the help of their act of cutting the throat of the hunted animals. To portray this, Golding has made use of the tribal chants:

Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood. (1 time)

Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in. (1 time)

Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! (5 times)

By realistically narrating the cutting of the throat of the pig in the first two examples, Golding intends to foreground the 'savage' (cruel) way in which the boys killed the hunt. But when,

out of their fear of the beast, the boys use the last utterance above, the object has changed from a pig to the beast. But again, the act of cutting the throat is as naturalistically portrayed as it is while killing the pig. Moreover, the above utterances appear in the text as chants of the boys. Typically such chanting and dancing is associated with the tribal people. But in case of the tribal people, it is their way of life. It is a kind of celebration, a necessity of their existence in the deep forests. But in the novel, the group of boys led by Jack is seen performing this dance on many occasions. This also shows that Golding wants to present the boys as the tribal people, the so called 'savages'.

The word 'hunt' and its various derivations like 'hunter/s', 'hunting', etc are used for 129 times in the text. Whereas the word 'savage' is first used in Chapter 2, the word 'hunter' is used in the first chapter itself, as a term for the boys in the group of Jack. Ralph says:

The choir belongs to you, of course.

They could be the army --.

Or hunters--.

They could be ---.

Looking at the words used to refer to the choirboys, first Ralph uses 'army' and then 'hunters'. But in the last clause, he could not think of a term. Whereas the word 'hunter' is typically primitive and is associated with the tribal, savage people, the word 'army' is associated with civilization. Golding prefers the word 'hunter' and it has been continuously used in the text. Ralph again continues:

Jack's in charge of the choir.

They can be -- what do you want them to be?

Hunters.

Ralph, in a way, in the very beginning, prophesizes that the boys under the charge of Jack will be hunters. The group of hunters is given the responsibility of providing the children with meat, looking after the signal fire and also, in the absence of the grown-ups, to protect the children. To fulfill these responsibilities, the hunters have to go far away from the area where Ralph has established the camp, far into the jungle. This underlines the association of the hunters and the jungle, making them, in turn, tribal. It also means, among other things, that Ralph is also responsible for making these choirboys tribal.

Accepting the responsibility as a hunter, Jack comes up with a plan which he thinks will help them get a hunt - to paint their faces like the tribal do. Accordingly, the choir boys paint their faces and go on a hunt and return with success. But this trick of Jack of painting their faces also leads the choir boys a step ahead in the direction of 'savages'.

As has been mentioned earlier, one of the responsibilities assigned to the hunters is to protect the group from possible threat. The major threat on the island is of the 'beast'. The

discovery of the beast on the island by the boys also point to the fear of the civilization of the dark. It is with the help of this and such fear that civilization seeks to maintain group harmony. The same happened on the island and a beast is invented. So the word 'beast' is used for 98 times and 'beastie' for 11 times. This shows the extent to which the idea of the beast is prevalent on the island. However, the reluctance of the boys to confront the beast is the result of its association with the darkness and the forest.

#### IV

While talking about the theme of the novel, Golding<sup>12</sup> said:

The theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical or respectable. The whole book is symbolic in nature except the rescue in the end where adult life appears, dignified and capable, but in reality enmeshed in the same evil as the symbolic life of the children on the island. The officer, having interrupted a man-hunt, prepares to take the children off the island in a cruiser which will presently be hunting its enemy in the same implacable way. And who will rescue the adult and his cruiser?

Of course, Golding is appreciable when he relates the defects of society to the defects of human nature and his allotting high value to the ethical nature of the individual. His understanding of the evil and cruelty of the naval officer also points to his humanitarian awareness. His condemnation of civilization as it is particularly reflected during and after the World War II is quite evident in the interrogation of the last sentence above. To bring home this point he provides symbolic significance to the boys on the island. Even the boys from the so called civilized families are capable of evil, violence and cruelty is what he seems to suggest. But unfortunately, in the process, Golding himself shows the extent to which he is shaped by the so called civilization of the imperial England/ Europe. His use of the word 'savage' to refer to the cruel and violent boys on the island and his invocation of the very lives of such savages in the behaviour of the boys point to his imperial attitude. Right from the very first chapter, as has been discussed earlier, Golding is under the impact of colonial ideology, of viewing the world in two halves - the civilized and the barbaric, savage. The extreme opposite of the civilized is the savage, he seems to think. In fact, it is appreciable that Golding introspects the defects of human society, i.e. civilization, in the form of its cruelty. But he fails to realize his own subjection to the imperial ideology, which is totally in contrast to the 'ethical nature of the individual' that he assigns high value to in the above quote.

**NOTES:**

1. The term "civilized barbarity" is used by Brian Shaffer in his book *Reading the Novel in English: 1950-2000* to refer to the disturbing picture of civilized reality in postmodern English novels. He groups together some novels that divide the world between the "civilized" European and "primitive" tribal people.

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11. Quoted in E. L. Epstein's "Notes" to *Lord of the Flies*, Capricorn Books, (NY, 1959), pp. 250-51.